

**Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Government Reform Committee Hearing
“MS-13 and Counting: Gang Activity in Northern Virginia”
July 14, 2006**

Good morning, and thank you for coming out to Fairfax City for today’s hearing. We will be examining the activity of gangs in Northern Virginia and the DC region including the notorious MS-13. We will also be looking at the state, local, and federal responses to the problem.

It’s very easy for us to think of gangs as something affecting big cities like Los Angeles or New York. But, more and more, gangs are moving into smaller cities and suburban communities, terrorizing residents and stretching enforcement and prevention resources to their limits. For example, MS-13, one of the nation’s most violent and prevalent gangs, has a presence in 33 states, with a membership that could exceed 20,000 in the United States.

And, as we are all well aware, MS-13 has an especially active presence here in Northern Virginia and suburban Maryland. But it’s not just MS-13. In Fairfax County, one of the nation’s most prosperous and well-educated communities, law enforcement officials say there is a gang presence in every high school.

Gangs continue to threaten our suburban communities in Dale City, Manassas, Herndon -- and even in the bucolic Shenandoah Valley. If there is a strong presence of MS-13 in such a peaceful area, can we say for sure where it is not?

We in Northern Virginia have been fortunate in that leaders at all levels are proactively addressing the gang problem. Foremost among these is my colleague and good friend, Congressman Frank Wolf. Congressman Wolf has spearheaded the fight against gangs in Northern Virginia from a policy standpoint and from an appropriations standpoint, securing nearly \$12 million of federal funding. When his 10th District came under attack by gangs, Congressman Wolf recognized that a traditional law enforcement organization could not effectively address gang issues. Rather, coordination between myriad federal, state, and local agencies would be vital. This was accomplished in the form of the Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force. We will hear today that the Task Force has been successful in fighting the gang problem in our neighborhoods. But let me be clear: without Congressman Wolf, the Task Force would not exist. The Task Force has made tremendous steps in gang suppression across Northern

Virginia. Congressman Wolf is to be commended for his dedication to fighting MS-13 and gangs in Northern Virginia, and I appreciate his being here today to lend his dedication and knowledge of this issue to this panel.

At the local level, Supervisor Sharon Bulova took the initiative by conducting a community dialogue on gang activity and revitalization needs. Throughout the spring of 2004, over 300 concerned citizens and activists took part in a series of meetings to examine gang-related issues and come up with recommendations to stem the problem. One such recommendation was to revitalize Ossian Park, located adjacent to Annandale High School. I am happy to announce that working with Supervisor Bulova, I was able to obtain \$250,000 in the FY07 Treasury, Transportation, Housing and Urban Development appropriations bill that recently passed the House. These funds will help reduce gang activity at the park and make it an anchor for community events.

We are well served by individuals such these, but the gang issue is something that my colleagues and I, as representatives from Northern Virginia, suburban Maryland, and Washington, D.C., must all turn our attention to. Congressman Wolf and I last year went to El Salvador.

Refugees from that country's civil war in the 1980s founded MS-13, and more recent Salvadoran immigrants continue to have a large presence in MS-13 and other gangs. In order to understand the problem here in this region, we need to understand the challenges at its source.

The good news is that we are making progress in the fight against gangs. The Task Force, with its unique multi-jurisdictional and multi-disciplinary approach, is able to cross county lines and fight gangs with efficiency and effectiveness. The Task Force has also seen a reduction in gang violence in the region. This system is working, and the partnership with federal agencies including U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the FBI, ATF, Customs and Border Patrol, the U.S. Marshals Service, Department of Justice, and the State Department is working. Congress's faith in the system is evident with the continued monies dedicated to fighting gangs on a local, national, and international level.

I represent Northern Virginia, but I am also a resident, a father, a neighbor, and a community member. What happens in our local parks, in our schools, and on our streets impacts my constituents and me personally.

The D.C. region is a dynamic community, with people of all nationalities and ethnicities who are proud to call it their home. That is one of our strengths. But it also presents unique challenges, and the introduction of gang violence is one of those challenges we must rise up to meet.

We cannot and will not surrender our streets to the violence of turf and retribution – a cycle of violence that too often claims not only the lives of those engaged in this warfare, but the lives of innocent victims as well.

Like all of us, I am tired of seeing headlines about Fairfax youths being attacked with machetes; or 17-year-old Herndon youths being shot to death by MS-13 gunmen on bicycles; or 22-year-old Reston men being beaten to death in a park by MS-13 members; or, as most recently, three Prince George's County young men murdered. Each life wasted to gang activity is one too many.

We, as Members of Congress, must continue to work to find solutions to the growing gang crisis in not only our own districts, but in districts across the Nation as well. And, this is why we call important hearings like this one: to

hear about the successes of our law enforcement and prevention communities and how we can continue to assist them best.

The enforcement and prevention communities must work hand-in-hand to successfully fights gangs, and today we are fortunate to be hearing from representatives from both in not only Northern Virginia but Maryland as well.

I am also pleased that we will be hearing from two elected officials who have worked on this issue at both the state and local levels. Gerry Connolly, Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors will inform us of Fairfax County's efforts combating this problem. Delegate Dave Albo, who is the Chairman of the Courts of Justice Committee in the Virginia House of Delegates, will discuss innovative tools that enable state prosecutors and law enforcement personnel to protect our communities.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here today, and, finally, I would like to thank the City of Fairfax for so generously making this facility available to us.